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Remote robot provides medical care to patients

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Patients at a senior home are getting personal care from a medical expert 700 miles away.

Silverado Senior Living has rented a robot that allows workers to inspect patients without having to make the trip. The robot is run by a doctor or other medical expert from a remote site.

"Residents respond just like it was me in person," said Steve Winner, a behavior specialist in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., who was examining Alzheimer's patients at Silverado on Tuesday.

The robot is between five and six feet tall with a computer screen that relays the face and voice to the patient. A camera allows the doctor to see the patient being inspected.

The intent is to bring immediate medical care to nursing homes that can't afford to hire experts full-time.

At Silverado, which has 135 beds for Alzheimer's patients, Winner wheeled the robot around a table of women with dementia and watched patients sing songs, wave flags and talk to one another. He also exchanged pleasantries with a few.

"They forget that I'm in this robot and they don't treat me any differently," Winner said.

Winner operated the robot with a joystick, propelling the machine forward, back or spinning it on three balls. The screen, which showed a close-up of Winner's face, rotates and can look down at objects along the floor. Heat sensors embedded at the bottom detect unseen obstacles.

After spinning through the halls of the home, Winner told Leona Brownlee, who couldn't remember her age, that he would come visit soon.

"I wish you would come out for a visit," Brownlee said. "It would be nicer than this way."

The patients know he's not present in person, but the technology that allows both parties to see and speak to each other in real time erases some of the distance.

Silverado plans to use the robot, which costs them \$3,000 a month, to train staff, as well as provide medical services such as evaluating skin conditions or watching a patient walk.

Mobility can be a problem for Alzheimer's patients. An expert advising on how a patient walks can be very helpful to the onsite staff, said Michael Chan, the vice president of business development for InTouch Health. InTouch designed the robots.

Silverado won't lay off any staff and doesn't plan to replace face-to-face medical attention with technology.



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The owners of many senior living communities have a team of experts that travel between facilities, Chan said. But the arrangement means experts, including psychologists, dementia specialists, nutritionists and nurses, spend most of their time traveling.

With the remote connection, a nutritionist could evaluate patients without needing to travel.

The person behind the robot spends between 80 and 90% of the active time talking to other nurses or health care professionals, said Tim Wright, marketing vice president for InTouch. Many of the patients are already cared for onsite, and an expert is needed only for consultation. Sometimes the patient's family also gets a consultation.

Currently four InTouch robots work in the health care industry. They're in a senior housing center in Lebanon, Ohio, at a hospital in Baltimore, and at Silverado's Calabasas, Calif., and Salt Lake City locations.

Silverado, which has 12 locations nationwide, is considering installing one in a senior center in Houston, Texas.

Wright said the next generation of robots may have arms, to open doors, touch elevator buttons or push someone in a wheelchair.

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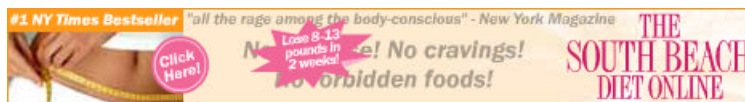
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